

Main vs non-main verb constructions in Malayalam: Implications for tense and aspect

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Amritavalli & Jayaseelan (2005), Hany Babu & Madhavan (2003), a.o. raise the question of whether the traditional tense morphemes should be reanalyzed as aspect. Within this debate, I examine the *-u/i* morpheme, traditionally the past tense marker, which Amritavalli & Jayaseelan (2005) (A&J) argue is a perfective marker. I argue with Hany Babu & Madhavan (2003) and Asher & Kumari (1997) a.o., that *-u/i* in non-main verbs is distinct from that used in main verbs. In main verbs, *-u/i* is a past tense marker and in non-main verbs it is semantically vacuous frozen form (cf. Jayaseelan 2003). I propose an account for how non-main verbs are temporally interpreted, as well as for the appearance of relative tenses in multi-verb constructions.

Morphosemantics of *-u/i* in main verbs Looking at (1), where the eating event must be completed and the topic time before the UT, we might think that *-u/i* is a past perfective marker.

- (1) (innale) njaan pazhum kazhicch-u.
yesterday I banana eat-PAST
'I ate a banana (yesterday).'

A&J argue that *-u/i* is only a perfective marker and that its past interpretation comes from a default mechanism that assigns perfective sentences past tense (cf. Lin 2006 for Mandarin, Mucha 2013 for Hausa). However, unlike Mandarin and Hausa, the proposed past tense default interpretation cannot be overridden by future adverbs, (2), or future contextual information, (3), to give a future perfective interpretation in Malayalam. Based on (2)-(3), I conclude that *-u/i* is a genuine past tense marker.

- (2) *naale raavile njaan {pazhum kazhicch-u, jayicch-u, peedich-u}
tomorrow morning I banana eat-PAST win-PAST fear-PAST
'Tomorrow morning I will {eat a banana, win, be scared/afraid}.'

- (3) A: innu rathri njaan kunj-u bakshanum kodukk-aam-oo?
Today night I baby-DAT food give-MOD-Q
'Am I supposed to feed the baby tonight?'

B: *nii varum-bool eekum, kunje urang-i.
You come-when by.then baby sleep-PAST
'When you arrive, the baby will already be asleep.'

Iatridou (2000) shows that cross-linguistically languages allow "fake" pasts but not "fake" perfectives in counterfactual constructions. Malayalam uses the form *und.aayirunn-u* in the counterfactual construction in (4a). A plain conditional can occur with the present form, (4b). Given the cross-linguistic tendency, it would be very surprising if *-u/i* were a perfective marker.

- (4) a. enikku oru car **und.aayirunn**-enkil njaan santhosham ull-avan aay-eene.
I.DAT one car be.PAST-CONDIT I happy be-REL be.PAST-PART
'If I had a car, I would be happy.'
b. enikku oru car **und**-enkil santhosham aak-um.
I.DAT one car be.PRES-CONDIT happy be.FUT
'If I have a car, I am happy.'

Additional evidence against a perfective meaning comes from the second imperfective, which is created from one of the infinitive forms of the verb plus the tense forms of the 'being' verb *aanu*. As such, the second past imperfective form of 'eat' is *kazhikk-uka aayirunn-u*. If the *-u/i* is a perfective marker, then an infinitive plus a perfective verb creates the second past imperfective. This seems unlikely. From this I conclude that *-u/i* is only a past tense marker (TT<UT, Klein 1994) and not a past perfective marker.

Morphosemantics of *-u/i* in non-main verbs As A&J point out, the data in (5) shows that the *-u/i* in non-main verbs does not contribute a past tense (TT<UT) meaning.

(5) a. njaan oru maanga pootticch-**u** thinn-**unnu**-Ø.

I one mango pluck- U/I eat-IMPV₁-PRES

‘I pluck and eat (or am plucking and eating) a mango.’ (A&J p199: 38a, my glosses)

b. njaan oru maanga pootticch-**u** thinn-**um**.

I one mango pluck- U/I eat-FUT

‘I will pluck and eat a mango.’ (Jayaseelan 2003 p68: 2b, my glosses)

An interpretation of *-u/i* as a perfective marker on non-main verbs faces several problems. In (6) the perfective nature of the *-u/i* would destroy the homogeneity needed for a universal reading and conflict with the progressive auxiliary on the non-main verb. The *-u/i* form (traditionally called the ‘past’ stem) can occur with the perfective auxiliary, *itt-u*, itself a frozen non-main verb form, (7). If *-u/i* is the perfective, then it isn’t clear why 2 perfective markers are needed here.

(6) njaan ponn-appol, avan moonnu manikkoor-aayi paper ezhuth-**i**-kkond-irikk-ukay.aayirunnu.

I leave.PAST-when he three hours-adv paper write-U/I-PROG-PERF₂-IMPV₂.PAST

‘When I left, he had been writing the paper for 3 hours.’

(7) avan paatu **keett-itt-u** paper ezhuth-**i**.

he song hear.U/I form-perfv-U/I paper write-PAST

‘He listened to music then wrote a paper.’

Finally, A&J account for the non-main action in (5) being completed prior to the beginning of the main action by saying that *-u/i* is a perfective. However, common perfective semantics (ST \subseteq TT, Klein 1994, a.o.) alone do not yield the desired reading: the perfective only orders the ST with respect to the TT. It says nothing about the relative ordering of the completed events. As such, A&J would need *-u/i* to encode a perfective and a relative past tense meaning. However, this incorrectly predicts that the non-main events in (8) are completed before the main event. The actual meaning is that the main and non-main events are contemporaneous. As a result, I conclude that *-u/i* is neither past nor perfective and, indeed, possibly semantically vacuous.

(8) avan padicch-**u** padippicch-**u** jooli cheyth-**u** jeevikk-unnu-Ø.

he study-U/I teach- U/I job do-U/I live-IMPV₁-PRES

‘He lives studying, teaching and working.’

Account for the semantics of non-main verbs I propose an account similar to Lin’s (2006, 2010) tenseless account for Mandarin for the semantics of non-main verbs. Like Lin, I assume two default rules that can be overridden. The first is a lexical aspect to grammatical aspect mapping default rule (cf. Bohnemeyer & Swift 2001), by which telic events give rise to default perfective aspect and atelic events to default imperfective aspect. The second is a grammatical aspect to tense mapping default rule, by which non-main verbs with imperfective aspect get a relative present tense interpretation, while those with perfective aspect receive a relative past tense interpretation. The major difference between my account and Lin’s is that instead of aspect yielding *absolute* temporal defaults (i.e. relative to the UT), aspect here provides *relative* temporal defaults. Under my analysis, *pootticch-u* ‘pluck’ in (5) has a default perfective aspect which yields a default relative past tense interpretation and *padicch-u* ‘study,’ *padippicch-u* ‘teach,’ *jooli cheyth-u* ‘work’ in (8) have default imperfective aspect and default relative present tense interpretations. This default process doesn’t apply in Malayalam main verbs because, unlike Mandarin, they have tense marking. As a result, the default process cannot kick in.

Selected References Amritavalli, R., & K.A. Jayaseelan. 2005. OUP. ♦Klein, W. 1994. *Time in Language*. ♦Lin, J. 2006. *Journal of Semantics* 23:1-53. ♦Mucha, A. 2013. *L&P*36: 371-415.